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## MATERIALS FOR A DOMESTIC HISTORY OF ENGLAND.

BY GEORGE HARRIS, Esq., F.S.A., F.R.H.S.

THERE are as many different modes of writing the history of each country, as there are differences between one country and another in all those various qualities which contribute to constitute the character of a nation. Some histories treat on the laws and constitution, some on the political contentions, some on the commercial enterprises, and some on the natural productions, of a country. That, however, which appears to me to be the most important and the most interesting department of history relating to any country,—that which comes home nearest to our hearts and feelings,—is its domestic history, embracing an account of the manners and customs, the pursuits and habits, and every-day life of the people at large. This, however, strange as it may seem, is one of the most neglected portions of history, not only as regards nations in general, but more particularly as regards our own. So is it also with respect to the ancient world, of whose domestic every-day life we know but very little, and have no regular history, although the materials for such a work are by no means scanty. We nevertheless possess histories in abundance of the political contests and intrigues in which the people of each country and their rulers have been engaged, of their wars with other nations, and of their theological controversies not less fierce. We have, indeed, some interesting records of the customs of this country, and of certain districts in it, at particular periods, as also of its costume and mode of building; but no general domestic history of it has as yet appeared. Some valuable contributions to our domestic history are, however, contained in the chapters on manners and customs in

the "Pictorial History of England," and on the same subject in Lord Macaulay's History. Scotland, nevertheless, has been before us in this respect; and the "Domestic Annals" of that country by the late Robert Chambers afford at once a full, correct, and most valuable record of the social every-day life, and rise and progress of civilisation in that part of the empire. And yet England is inferior to no nation in the world as regards the interesting nature of its domestic transactions, as it is also rich in the materials available for such a history.

I propose, therefore, on the present occasion, to inquire into the nature of these materials, to specify the principal of them, and to point out the manner in which they may each be turned to account.

The earliest authentic record that we possess of the domestic every-day life of the people of this country, is that contained in Cæsar's Commentaries, which is not only valuable in itself for the direct information that it affords, but it renders available other materials, such as the Druidical monuments, and other ancient remains still existing among us, telling us the use that was made of them, and how they were applied in their domestic avocations. Cæsar also supplies us with much interesting information as to the dress of the people, their buildings and mode of living, their religious rites, and manner of conducting warfare. In the work in question, a great deal of curious matter is also contained as to the manners and customs and mode of living of the Gauls and Germans, and also of the Romans themselves.

Supplementary to this regular history afforded by Cæsar, and rendered peculiarly valuable as materials for history by his explanations as to the uses to which they were applied, are the Druidical monuments in this country and on the Continent, several of which are still remaining in a more or less perfect state. Of these, some were used as temples for religious worship, and in which sacrifices were also offered, of which Cæsar affords a description. One of these temples, that of Gâvr Innis, is

*Temple of  
Gâvr Innis.*

preserved in a very perfect state on a small island on the coast of Brittany. The sculptures on the stones I have not been able to find any one able to decipher. Human victims intended for sacrifice are said to have been bound by cords passing through the hole cut in one of the stones, the sides of which bear evident marks of friction.

The British, Roman, and Danish encampments, and also the remains of early roads yet to be seen in this country, and the discoveries made in several ancient tumuli, furnish additional materials for a description of the habits and mode of living of the people of those times; as do also the earthen vessels of different kinds for domestic use that have been dug up, and the sepulchral remains that have been disinterred. Implements of war, of various kinds and of different materials, have also been found, and have been occasionally preserved by the peculiar quality of the soil in which they had lain for so many centuries embedded. Remains of ancient British boats or canoes thus kept from decay have been dug up. Coins, too, of various kinds and materials, are occasionally met with. And not far from the place where we are now assembled, the remains of Roman tessellated pavements, belonging to baths or villas, have been discovered, of the use of which ancient historians inform us.

Nearly as ancient, and quite as interesting, as the solid remains of antiquity to which I have been alluding, are the illuminations contained in the ancient missals, several of them extending back to the period of the Anglo-Saxons, and which afford very vivid, though somewhat quaint, ideas of the domestic every-day life of our Anglo-Saxon ancestors. Some of these missals are preserved in the British Museum. They are very small, generally about the size of the palm of the hand.

A drawing in an Anglo-Saxon manuscript, probably of the ninth century, contains a representation of a house, which is apparently built of wood, and at the entrance to which thick curtains are suspended to keep out the cold. One article of very severe

*Anglo-Saxon  
house and bed.*

penance, which was occasionally enjoined in those times, was not to be allowed to sleep on a soft bed.

In a representation of an Anglo-Saxon dinner-party, in a manuscript of the same period, the servants go down on their knees, and hand the meat to the company on spits. The guests sat according to their rank ; *Anglo-Saxon dinner-party.* and it is recorded, that if any one presumed to violate this rule, by taking a higher place than he was entitled to, the rest of the company pelted him with bones. Knives, and also loaves and bowls, are seen on the table, but no forks or dishes. A horn was used to hold the wine ; and as all the company drank out of the same vessel, it was divided by partitions, so that no one who was greedily disposed could take more than his share.\*

From the Anglo-Saxon missals, and the drawings contained in them, we turn for information as to our domestic history to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, some of which are still in existence in our public libraries, and several editions of which have been printed in English. Curious references in them will occasionally be found to the mode of building houses, the style of dress, and the means of travelling in those days. And it is a subject of interest in our time to observe the exact notice that they took of the appearance of comets and eclipses, which were always regarded as prognostications of some dire event, which is also recorded and traced to them. References to meteoric showers, which have attracted so much attention at the present day, are also made.

Churches of the Anglo-Saxon period are also existing, the carving and sculpture on which afford us information, not only as to the style of architecture and sculpture, but also as to the costume and mode of building then in use.

Ancient tapestry, as well as ancient drawings, in many cases affords vivid and accurate ideas of the domestic everyday life of the period to which it relates. This is the case

\* The Anglo-Saxons possessed boiling vessels for the purpose of cooking their meat. Strange, however, to say, these vessels were made, not of iron or brass, but of leather.—*Pictorial History of England*, vol. i. p 326.

with the celebrated Bayeux tapestry, representing the various events connected with the invasion of this country by William the Conqueror, and the battle of Hastings. It is said to have been worked by Queen Matilda, the wife of William, and the ladies of the court, and is still preserved, in a very perfect state, in the Town Hall of Bayeux, in Normandy. From the representations here given, we glean information as to the costume of the time, the articles of furniture in use, the style of building, and many other points of interest as to domestic life.

Further details as to the manners and customs of the Anglo-Norman period are afforded by the illuminations in the missals of those times, several of which, in a high state of preservation, are in the British Museum.

A very early and rude specimen of Anglo-Norman art is intended to represent a wine-cellar of this period, and also a funeral. From this we learn the style of building, and also of vessels for wine, and the sort of ladders or staircases which people had to climb. Stone coffins were then generally in use for persons of the higher rank ; while, for those of the middle or lower classes, it appears, from other drawings, that they were made of metal or wood.

Inventories of various kinds, and legal documents, which are ordinarily regarded as the driest of all sources of information, occasionally serve to supply us with facts respecting our domestic history of considerable value. Thus, Doomsday Book, which was compiled by the direction of William the Conqueror, in order that he might obtain an account of the land in this country, its nature and resources, informs us of many curious particulars respecting the state of the people at the time ; while in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle already alluded to is contained the following reference to that book :—

“So very narrowly did he [William the Conqueror] cause the survey to be made, that there was not a single hide, nor a rood of land, nor—it is shameful to relate that which he thought no shame

to do—was there an ox, or a cow, or a pig passed by, that was not set down in the accounts, and then all those writings were brought to him.”\*

From Domesday Book we also learn how large a portion of the country was at that time covered by forest, which was principally oak and beech, and that Essex, in particular, was nearly all forest. It also appears from the same authority that keeping swine was the principal occupation in the rural districts, so that a tree at that time was valued according to the number of swine that could be collected under its branches. These animals were kept in the woods, and were fed on acorns and beech-mast; hence the word “bacon” is derived from the Saxon *bucon*, or beech. In Domesday Book it is recorded that in Middlesex there was swine’s food for 16,535 hogs; in Hertfordshire, for 30,705; and in Essex, for 92,991.

Account-books and ledgers are almost universally, and doubtless very deservedly, regarded as the dullest and most uninteresting of all documents with which we ever come in contact; yet the contents of some of these, when they are closely scrutinised, will prove not only very interesting, but serve to afford much knowledge as to our domestic history. Thus the accounts preserved in some of our old cathedrals relating to the execution of works of art, throw considerable light on the early history of painting and sculpture, showing how works of this kind were contracted for by the square yard, certain specifications as to the nature and quality of the beings to be represented, whether angels or demons, and the apparel with which they were to be adorned.† Mr Robert Chambers, in his “Domestic Annals of Scotland,” gives a copy of a bill sent in at an early period to a parish in Scotland for burning witches, which affords some curious details as to the proceedings adopted in cases of this kind. The account in question contains items

\* A. D. 1085.

† In one of these contracts it is specified that there shall be “a heaven made of timber and stained cloth,” and “a hell made of timber and iron-work, with devils in number thirteen.”—*Cunningham’s History of British Painters*, vol. i. pp. 4-18.

“for coals for the witches ;” “for a man to be jumps to them ;” “for a tar-barrel ;” “for tows ;” and “for the executioner for his pains.” A very old account preserved among the archives of the Corporation of Coventry contains items for making a wig and a pair of gloves for the devil ; which is explained by the fact that the account in question relates to the preparation for a mystery or miracle-play, common in the period to which it relates. Portions of a ledger belonging to a maker of court dresses in the time of Charles the Second, now lying on the table before you, afford a curious picture of the costume of the period in use among the upper ranks.

*Kymesman's  
accounts, temp.  
Charles II.*

Wills of the Anglo-Saxon period are preserved in the British Museum, which also serve to show the great importance attached to swine as a commodity at that period. One nobleman bequeaths to his two daughters a legacy of two thousand swine ; and another person makes a bequest of two hundred swine for the purpose of having masses sung for the good of his soul.

The inventories preserved of the furniture and household utensils in the houses of some of our great nobility of an early period, afford a vivid notion of the style of living in those times--of the vast retinue that was kept up, and of the various articles of domestic appliance then in use.

From an interesting manuscript volume of the fourteenth century, belonging to the Corporation of the City of London, and called the *Liber Albus*, may be gleaned some curious particulars of the domestic history of that period. Houses in London were at first mere hovels of wood or plaster-work ; but after the city was burnt in the reign of King Stephen, there was framed an ordinance requiring stone materials for partition walls. At this period London houses seem to have consisted of but one story. But early in the fourteenth century, we find them of two or three stories high, entered probably by stairs on the outside, and giving rise to frequent disputes. Windows are mentioned, but glass was rare.



Chimneys are supposed not to have become common before the year 1300.

Household and other regulations, too, belonging either to the royal court or to the mansions of certain great families, afford occasionally a curious insight into the manners and mode of living in those times. Thus, one law of the Anglo-Saxon period deprived of the royal protection "any person who should strike the Queen, or snatch anything forcibly from her hand."

The following somewhat quaint, but extremely practical, regulations are extracted from those relating to the household of an archbishop of the fifteenth century :—

"For uttering an oath, a fine of one penny. The same for leaving a door open.

"A fine of twopence from Lady Day to Michaelmas, for all who are in bed after six, or out after ten.

"A fine of one penny for any man waiting without a trencher, or who is absent at a meal.

"For any follower visiting the cook, one penny."

Old plays and poems of different kinds will frequently be found very serviceable in throwing light on the domestic history of the period when they were produced. I need not point out how vivid a picture is afforded by Shakespeare of the manners and customs of the people he describes. Chaucer contains a mine of wealth in this respect; and you may almost fancy, after reading some of the scenes which he so graphically portrays, that you have actually yourself witnessed them.

A French poem of the fourteenth century contains some very specific directions as to the behaviour proper for ladies, thus leading us to infer what must have been the general state of manners at the period in question, and the domestic freaks in which the fair sex were wont to indulge.

By these regulations it is required that the ladies walk orderly to church, and they are desired not to run or jump in the streets. It is further demanded that "ladies should be neat in their persons, and keep their nails cut short; and that

they should not laugh or talk too loud at dinner, nor daub their fingers with their food." They are told that they may wipe their lips on the tablecloth, but must not blow their noses with it. It is further ordered that "when ladies walk in the streets, they must not stop as they pass to look in at people's windows, for this is neither agreeable nor seemly." They are also taught that "when they visit their friends, they ought not to bounce all at once into the room, but stop at the entrance and announce their coming by a little gentle cough, or by speaking a word." The concluding regulations forbid the fair sex to indulge in either filching or fibbing.

Diaries and journals kept by private persons often serve to throw a great deal of light on the domestic character of the period during which they were written. Thus the diary of the great philosopher Locke contains an interesting notice of the sports and pastimes in London in his day: "the wrestling in Lincoln's Inne Field every evening all the summer; bear and bull-baiting, and sometimes prizes, at the Bear-garden."\*

Laws of all kinds, particularly Acts of Parliament, are generally considered a dry study. Some of our ancient laws, however, afford us a keen insight into the state of society and domestic life in those times. Cæsar in his Commentaries gives us some account of the laws and modes of punishment in use among the ancient Britons, of which burning in huge wicker frames filled with straw was one. He also informs us that husbands had the power of life and death over their wives and children. On the death of a nobleman, if there was any suspicion against the wives, they were put to the torture as slaves. If they were thought guilty, after cruel torments they were burnt to death. In early times very severe laws were made, and great oppressions were exercised, in order to secure an ample supply of game for the king. Villages were depopulated to make forests. King Edward the Confessor received annually from his manor of Barton, near Gloucester, three thousand loaves of bread for the maintenance of his dogs. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle already referred to tells

\* Lord King's "Life of Locke," p. 134.

us that William the Conqueror "made large forests for the deer, and enacted laws therewith, so that whoever killed a hart or a hind should be blinded. As he forbade killing the deer, so also the boars; and he loved the tall stags as if he were their father. He also appointed concerning the foxes that they should go free." The same chronicle mentions mutilation of different kinds, and putting out the eyes, as a common mode of punishment at that period. Hanging and stoning were also resorted to. The preamble of a statute passed in the year 1285 states that "from day to day robberies, murders, burnings, and theft be more often used than they have been heretofore." No man was, in consequence, allowed to lodge during the night in the suburbs of any town, unless his host would answer for him. Directions were also given for clearing the sides of highways of ditches and bushes, "in which a man may lurk to do hurt."

One meritorious act recorded of William the Conqueror in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and which, the writer says, ought not to be forgotten, is, that the "good order" which he established in the country was "such that any man, who was himself aught, might travel over the kingdom with a bosom full of gold unmolested; and no man durst kill another, however great the injury he might have received from him."\*

This happy state of things does not appear to have been permanent, as the same chronicle records that, during the reign of Henry I., a court was held in Leicestershire, "and there they hanged more thieves than had ever before been executed within so short a time, being in all forty-and-four men; and they deprived six men of their eyes, and certain other members."† In later times *Pillory, and Witch-burning.* the pillory was introduced, and was a frequent method of punishment, especially in cases of fraud.

A singular illustration of the mode in which Acts of Parliament serve to supply us with information as to the state of society and domestic life in the period during which they were made, is afforded by the fact that in 1513 a bill passed the House of

\* A.D. 1087.

† A.D. 1124.

Commons subjecting all robbers and murderers to the civil power. But before it became a law, a proviso was added to it, that bishops, priests, and deacons should be exempted from it. Some of our early Acts of Parliament regulate the quantity and quality of dishes to be allowed on table at one meal. In the year 1363, the attention of the House of Commons was called to the fashion of dress in those times, and various restrictions were imposed on the liberty of the subject in that respect. A law passed in 1463 ordered all jackets to be worn of a certain length behind. Such, indeed, was the rage of fashion at that time, that one of the old chronicles informs us, that "the doors of all the state apartments in one of the palaces on the Continent had to be raised and widened, in order that the head-dresses of the queen and her ladies might have room to enter."

The first law relating to highways, which throws some interesting light on the state of our public roads at that time, was made in the reign of Queen Mary. Its success may be judged of from the fact that in the reign of Queen Elizabeth coaches were first introduced into England. Posts for the conveyance of intelligence are said to have been adopted by Richard III. when Duke of Gloucester. Travelling carriages were, however, in use in the fifteenth century, as we find not only references to them, but representations of them in the missals.

An interesting collection of Acts of Parliament of the time of Henry VII., some of which serve to throw much light on the domestic every-day life of that period, has been published by Dr John Rae, who is a member of the Council of this Society.

Much information as regards the state and the nature of crime at different periods of our history, and as to the mode of punishing it, is to be gleaned from the illuminations in the ancient missals. One of those drawings of the fifteenth century is in four compartments, the first of which represents criminals going to prison; in the next, one of the criminals is being bound; in the third,

*Criminals of the  
fifteenth century.*

they are being conveyed to the place of execution ; and in the last, the executioner is preparing to strike off the offender's head.

In an old manuscript of the fifteenth century, preserved in the British Museum, which not only belonged to Richard III., but has his autograph on one of the leaves, are several representations of instruments of punishment and of torture ; and one of the drawings represents a criminal being fastened to the rack, on which he is about to be tortured. *A man on the rack.*

In some ancient buildings on the Continent are preserved, not only the torture chambers in which people suffered in the manner described, but also the instruments themselves which were used on those occasions. In the dungeon under the Town Hall at Ratisbon, a rack is armed with a spiked roller for tearing the flesh off the back. These substantial relics of the mode of inflicting punishment in ages gone by, afford materials for that portion of the domestic history of the period which no written description, even if contemporaneous, could supply.

The records of early trials in our courts of justice, not only those relating to crimes, but to civil matters as well, frequently serve to afford us very vivid descriptions of the state of society and of domestic every-day life at the period to which they relate, and are well deserving of a careful study by those who desire to write an accurate history of this class. From these may be culled an account, not only of the proceedings which led to the trial, but of the mode of living at that time, the pursuits of the people, the manner of travelling, the amusements then in fashion, and, indeed, the general character of the era.

Old newspapers are also very serviceable in this respect, and that not only as regards the regular news contained in them, but their advertisements also, which afford us an insight into the way of living, and the commercial dealings of the period. Notifications of travelling vehicles are among the advertisements frequent at the commencement of the last century.

Thus, the *Daily Courant* of the 22d May 1719 contains the following announcement :—

“All gentlemen and others that have a mind to go for Edinburgh, in North Britain, are informed that a coach and coachman, with six able horses, will be ready to return from Mr Rogers’s, at the George Inn in the Haymarket, St James’, the 30th day of May.”

Another advertisement is to the following effect :—

“At the Hart and Tun, at the upper end of Hatton Garden, on Monday, the 17th inst., sets out an empty coach for the Bath, and will carry any gentlemen or ladies very reasonable.”

The above relate to ordinary conveyances ; but the following is of an extraordinary character, both as regards the nature of the vehicle in question, and the description of passengers sought to be allured within its walls.

“*For the Benefit of the Distressed.*”

“In a few days (if God permit) will set out for the Bath a large commodious waggon, which will conveniently hold thirty-six persons ; and there being but six places yet taken, such weak persons as are willing to take advantage of this conveyance, are desired speedily to send in their names to Robert Knight, waggoner, at the Three Crowns, in Arlington Street. The said waggon inns at the King’s Head, near the King’s Bath, at Bath.

“This invention is of the same nature of Dr Green’s carriage, to Scotland, but much improved, as containing three times the number of passengers.”

Travelling of a more ambitious kind seems in those days to have been somewhat hazardous, not only on account of the extreme badness of the roads, which do not appear to have much improved since the law respecting them was made in Queen Mary’s reign, and, in consequence, we are told, that carriages frequently stuck fast in the mud, and had to be dragged out by a team of horses from a neighbouring farm ; but also on account of the immense number of highwaymen with which the country was at that time infested. One of the newspapers of the year 1720 informs us that on the 27th of

February "all the stage coaches coming from Surrey to London were robbed by highwaymen."

A graphic description is contained in an advertisement relating to some desperate fellows who had been apprehended on suspicion of housebreaking and robbing on the highway :—

"They both wear wigs, one has a frowning downish look, the other has very high cheek-bones. They had, when seized, a pair of pistols each, two large knives, a chissel without a handel, a sack, and two cords, with tinder-boxes, matches, and gunpowder. One rode on a grey mare, the other on a bay mare ; they had no boots, only spurs, and it is expected there are more in the gang. Any persons who have been robbed, are desired to go and view them in the Marshalsea."

A paragraph in a newspaper of the year 1722 mentions—

"There were no western letters yesterday, the mail being robbed on Monday last, between eleven and twelve at night, in the road near Chinock, in the midway between Crewkern and Sherburn, by one footpad, who carried off the bags belonging to all the towns between the Land's End and Yeovil." \*

Hogarth's paintings and engravings serve to render complete the materials for a graphic description of the domestic history of our country during the last century. On the whole, indeed, there is nothing like pictorial and sculptural representation as a record of the events of the period to which it relates. The relics of carving, both in stone and wood, in many of our churches and public buildings, are of inestimable value in this respect. The painted glass, too, is worthy of much attention on this account ; and, in conjunction with the illuminations in our missals, the style of which it frequently much resembles, presents graphic representations of the costume of the period, and also records the sort of buildings in use. The missals, indeed, afford in succession a history of the costume of this

\* So late, however, as the year 1786, during the month of January, it is recorded by Mr Horace Walpole in one of his letters, that the mail was stopped in Pall Mall, close to the Palace, and deliberately pillaged, at so early an hour as a quarter past eight in the evening.—*Wright's England under the House of Hanover*, vol. ii. pp. 333. 334.

country from the Anglo-Saxon times to the end of the fourteenth century, at which period engravings of different kinds begin to supply their place in this respect. In the beautiful missal called the "Romance of the Roses," you have a representation of costume in the fifteenth century; of that of people of the upper rank, of that of men of the middle class, and of that worn by ladies in a convent. Representations of buildings of every variety are to be found in these missals, of churches, castles, cities, and domestic dwellings. Engravings, though at first very rudely executed, are also very serviceable here. I have already alluded to the information supplied by the *Liber Albus* as to the early style of houses in London.

*Costume of the  
fifteenth century.*

The most graphic ideas of shipping at various periods in the olden times, are to be gathered from ancient painted glass, and the illuminations in some of our missals. In conjunction with what is preserved of the actual armour and weapons then in use, the materials for history of this kind are perfect.

*Ships of the  
fifteenth century.*

*Mode of warfare  
in the fifteenth  
century.*

Not only, however, are real and literal and grave representations of persons and scenes such as they really appeared, valuable as materials for history, especially of a domestic kind, but representations of another class, which are not so real because not so literal, may occasionally also be resorted to. I allude to caricatures as connected with the graphic art, and to satirical poems and essays as regards typographical description, in which, after making all due allowance for exaggeration, much truth is often contained, and which is expressed with far more force than is the case in ordinary narratives.

Such are the very various and very opposite materials from which it appears to me that a complete, correct, and graphic domestic history of this country, embracing all that relates to the every-day life, the manners, habits, and pursuits of the people at large, of all ranks and classes, might be composed. History of this description, although the most neglected, seems to me to be by far the most important, the most inte-



resting, and that which comes nearest to the hearts of us all. It is also in many respects the most valuable and the most practical, as it is mainly from the experience of the past in this respect that we can hope to ameliorate our present condition. Much towards the encouragement of the work may be effected by societies such as that to which we belong, and much too by each individual member. Some branches of the subject are of almost necessary interest to most of us ; and the materials for such a history are such as each has the occasional opportunity of contributing. Moreover, as the materials are drawn from so many different and widely varying sources,—art, manufactures, national industry, warfare, criminal statistics, navigation,—all contributing to make up the general mass ; so is it, of all history, the most universal, embracing the most important points connected with the rise and progress not only of one particular nation, but of mankind at large.

According as this Society increases and advances in membership, in influence, and in resources, as it is rapidly doing, I trust that it may become the repository of some of the more interesting materials for a Domestic History of England, such as those to which I have been referring, according as opportunities offer for collecting them, or the liberality of individuals may induce them to present them to our library. Indeed, under the auspices of this Society, I should rejoice to see produced a domestic history of this country worthy of the subject and of this Society also. Efforts such as these not only add to the importance of such an institution, but essentially contribute to increase its influence, add to its interest, and confer upon it a claim for national support.